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## The Ticket Office Girl

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## DANIEL DOEHR

### *The Ticket Office Girl*

I saw the ticket office girl again. Of course, everyone saw her at some point in the day being that she could be seen on the sign on the back of the drive-in screen at the edge of town along the highway. Once she let someone talk her into putting on a kind of Las Vegas cowgirl outfit with white boots and fringe and posing on the hood of a car and waving as though she was in a parade. Most people initially mistook it for a chamber of commerce billboard welcoming, or more likely a saying good-bye, to people as they drove down the highway. Some simply thought it was for the club that kept opening and closing outside the city limits. Sadly, no one thought of the drive-in, except when they were making a joke. No, I didn't see her there, I saw her buying a paperback from the wire rack at the drugstore, looking less like a made-up movie star and more like the girl who sat in the booth by the highway once the sun set. There she looked like someone who could step out of a bus and meet Montgomery Clift somewhere in the southwest, surrounded only by the shadow of the bus station and the silence of an empty phone booth, not saying a single word and cupping the left side of his face with her hand for a single moment before getting into the car and driving away with him. One could even imagine the bus ride and what she left behind, the suitcase on the seat beside her and the miles of highway narrowing into an indefinite point, the earth stirring beneath her with an ancient steadiness and the skyline no longer metropolitan but numinous, becoming full of stars and the occasional planet encircled by a thin ring of light, all of it illuminated by the arc of the moon low in the sky making the dry lake bed silver and shallow and the mesa close and comforting, the earth suddenly blue and opened up like the unbuttoned blouse of a mother with her baby before bed.

She understood the earth and the places where the sea once belonged but were now bare, the rain coming again late at night one day when everyone was asleep, the movement of life through small moments that went unnoticed and meant more than people realized because they were the ones when something actually happened, when things changed and became different even though they still seemed familiar. In the summer months when she swam in the cement pool at the park, the smell of chlorine in her clothes and in her hair, she swam near the bottom trying to find the place where the bottom dropped off or at least feel it with the small part of her hand, tracing the cracks and contours with her fingertips, hoping to find the other hand, the one that turns the world in the same way you wind a clock while everyone and everything goes on and about their business and she wondered if this wasn't how Adam and Eve started, started with an innocent desire one morning that somehow went wrong and if the secret was not their shame or even what they saw but their story, the reason for their yearning, so that it all had to be remade, remembered in terms of a clothing ad with the two of them wearing cake plates, one circular and one square, appearing indifferent with each other after eating the apple like they never should have shared a meal together when in fact they were only self-conscious about what they should say and simply wanted to touch the tree one more time. She thought about them and the statue outside of the museum of the man with a hammer, his arm raised upward in benediction, and the building itself, seeming to yield, unable to contain a corner, outstretched and unfurled across the hillside, an enormous ribbon of metal bulging at the center waiting to be midwived under the tangle of trees, and the glass-block building across town where she once went to the ballet with her aunt and wore a cardigan with a narrow weave and watched a sleeping bride, a bride better than Venus, atop a bouquet of flowers with a paper fan unfolded across her middle, and later ate at a small restaurant by the boatyards on plates with an off-center pattern of a flower stem without a flower, all while the red neon of the sign reflected on the window, reversing the letters in a warm glow against the wall, making the entire room feel like the



inside of a flower and the food fresh and newly found, harvested by hands that held the horn of plenty and touched the ground where it was tender and pure. Her hunger burned and belonged to this, a kind of beginning, a beginning involving the petals she carried in the bottom of her purse and the pear tree in her backyard, their mutability, their transience part of a collective coming and going that gave life its virtue. She saw what happened when it would start to rain during the movie and the light kept shining but the screen grew wet and the people suddenly grew sharper behind the car windows, some of them leaving, some of them staying, their voices starting to the sound like an overheard conversation but all of them oddly discovered and suddenly aware of the world around them and its strangeness, everyone suddenly present and naked, unavoidably mistaken for someone else, the flickering light no longer forgiving but somehow photographic, none of it going away, all of it simply about to be buried somewhere in the blue darkness and borne out again in the politeness of a grocery store aisle or the narrowness of a brownstone foyer and its row of rectangular mailbox doors and parallel-lined wall tile. It seemed as though everything began and ended with an undone bra strap or a belt buckle, that things were built and then abandoned in the same moment, with the same urge, and that it didn't matter if it was the bridge by the stockyards built in the half arc of an opened hand or the soft vowel in the box of letters for the Laundromat sign that once was taken down and misplaced but still remembered first and foremost in an alphabet of a name, there was a darkness in the day that finally came out at night and it was the only way the craving, the desire could somehow make sense. And it wasn't simple like the puppets at the playhouse, the ones made out of a pair of ladders put together like a clothespin and then papered and plastered with tempera paints, but simple like the trickle of water coming off the edge of the roof where the gutter was bent, bent right where she stood on the step of the booth, making her uncomfortable but curious, even eager, almost willing in an odd way. After all, desire was what was left of a shadow after it rained, something that seemed to have come and gone but really stayed

behind and reemerged even stronger when the reel of film unwound itself and sounded as though it was stitching a dress together that would end up on a bedroom floor, forever opened up and turned inside out from having been taken off rather than put on, all the imperfections, the reverse pattern of the print, all of it visible and all of it public and plain to see. This underwire of emotion seemed to be everywhere, whether it was the Eiffel Tower in the movie poster out front or the umbrella she carried in case of rain, everyone knew what was underneath and she knew if she would lay down against the damp ground her impression would be left in the soft earth, it would be given up in a kind of offering or surrender, everyone would see, everyone would know, and she would be like the girl in the shoe ad that ran in the evening paper, part of a picture that suggested sin even though it only showed a barefoot couple from the waist down with the woman leaning forward with her heels arched up, and no matter what she wore after that she would never cover her nakedness. She would be the one people remembered as pulling down the shade for the bedroom window and making a dark murmur in someone else's room, never being able to buy pink mallows again but left breathless and bruised, bearing the mark and left to wonder about her flower box on the roof garden and the soft center where she always set her spade, suddenly feeling undone in the drizzle and darkness as she made her way home. It was no accident that the film reels resembled a pair of wedding rings left on a nightstand or that the inside of the earth really was like a piece of fruit that flowered in the darkness. Movies weren't a kind of fresco but really a moment between two people in the darkness, all of it held together and then pulled apart, kept in the same tender place as the constellations carefully connected to one another in some small invisible way, the stars and street lights belonging to a story that could be told again and again without it becoming different or broken or lost, still rooted in the idea that the world wasn't a place drawn out with a straight edge and a metal-tipped pen but with a piece of chalk on a playground, drawn to resemble the arc of a mother's arm in tender embrace, her heart pressed hard against the blank spot on the globe



where it still was bare and blue and beautiful. There was no need to wonder how Themis became blindfolded or why she stood on a stone instead of a wedding cake, her arm an awning balancing a pair of serving plates that dipped in the center with a recessed shallowness, or why the church with the re-skinned spire across the street from the half-block of storefronts kept its doors closed the day after the snow fell or why it wore its wound inside with its candles and confessional curtains, the sorrow seen in the stations of the cross spread out against the wall between each of the windows. It even made sense how Pluto was no longer a planet, even though it was still a place and even though everyone looked for it every night above the brick cornice of the bus station, still wondering what went on in the darkness underneath the hill one stifling afternoon in August and why the farmer suddenly cut down the tree and left his ax wedged in the stump without saying a word. Down at the public market you could see where the land rose up for the reservoir, the rows of tables stretching across the surface lot like the clotheslines in the backyards a few blocks over, the story of the picnic and the blanket still present in every piece of fruit and every pairing of placemats by the benches, the sprawl of the vine replaced with the wrought iron of the fence and the horn of plenty mounted on the hood of a truck, all the earth, all the people carrying the memory, the conscience of the darkness from the night before and every night before that, trying to conceal the urge, the moment of conception so they could be a communicant all over again and no longer corporeal or carnal but untouched and ready to receive the seed of life in a thin slice of lemon wafer cake. Only they didn't realize, they didn't know that desire was like one of those islands surrounded by the sea that people thought had long ago been lost and submersed by the shifting of the tide but actually remained and felt the nearness of the flood every night and knew it wouldn't disappear but simply become part of the past and that the missing girl carried away on the back of a bull would return, would be brought back, and she would tell a story of fruit cooking down into a caramel over an open fire and some Minoan sculptor awakening one night and no longer feeling

lost when he saw the pointed ends of a wave's arc in the bulge of the ocean and setting to work on a statue of a bull, his desire suddenly sated by the opening of the land and the healing of its wound with the lapping of the water at its tender edge. Eventually the fruit has to be eaten, its dark skin pulled back and shared, spoken with the same lingual release of an open vowel in the middle of a conversation, its stem still remaining deep inside where the seeds are outlined by the thin oval of an axis until they too are husked and broken free by the gentle palming of a hand. It is the course of life, this marriage of light and darkness in the flowering of a tree with its roots and branches drawn out the same above and below the ground, doing up close what the horizon does in the distance with the earth and sky, pairing the cosmos with the cusp of creation like a pair of bodies brought together without words, seeking solace in one another in the shadow of the sun, their slumber a slowness, a forgetfulness of everything they ever heard or were told, only able to understand the moment and its furtive language of ineffable longing. And later on, the postage stamp, the picture on the wall, that is part of it too, the remembering that comes afterward, the afterward of a private penance and a prayer of forgiveness and the painting of the world with a pair of scissors, trying to prune everything back but having to accept the tear in the tulle and taffeta undone after the dance in a parking lot and the break in the retaining wall by the bridge, the knowledge that things were not always as they seemed or should be but simply present somewhere in the world, quite often unnoticed and contented in the background, sort of like the lacquered panel on the wall, the one from an old ocean liner about taming horses, its story less about the west and wide open spaces than another age when everything happened underground or in the side of the earth and seemed forgotten until the water stirred again at the sight of the stars drawn out in the figure of a barefoot goddess quietly carrying a pitcher across the sky, her hunger a secret left unspoken and felt in the turning of the tide. Somewhere someone would be asleep, their hunger and expiation momentarily one, but the earth would move yet again in the night, desiring, circumvolving in its semi-circular

way, moving everything without actually changing it, and people would make their way home between the brownstones and bowling alleys, moving about with something only they understood, no longer the same but not different, wondering how far they would have to walk before the crown of the road no longer spoke of bedrock or the area between buildings wasn't the place where bodies met and dampness and darkness disappeared in the framework behind the abandoned billboard above the bus station, the circle of life completing its slow revolution with an apple opened in half. And the museum would have an exhibit, if not paintings then sculpture, something delicate and gossamer, suspended by a wire but resembling a flower grown from the ground and given as a kind of gift, and I would see her there, see her somewhere between the columns or coming from behind a curtain, and I would think of the movie ticket still in my pocket from the night before and I would think of how it rained early that morning and how the moon was faint, covered with the remains of a cloud, seeming more like a bride's veil than a window shade, and I would think of how I suddenly wanted to go to the pool at the far end of the park, or even the aquarium where it was silent and still, and touch the inside of the earth where it was tender and soft and look from behind the glass and watch a movie of another kind.